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Poems EVERY  
Catholic  
SHOULD KNOW

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*compiled by* JOSEPH PEARCE

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*For Beatrice*

*This I implored; and she, so far away,  
Smiled, as it seemed, and looked once more at me;  
Then unto the eternal fountain turned.*





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## *Preface*

BY JOSEPH PEARCE

It might be prudent in a preface to a book entitled *Poems Every Catholic Should Know* to address the question of whether Catholics should bother to know poetry at all. We all live busy lives and we might feel that we don't have time for anything but the most important things. Can we really claim that poetry is all that important? Don't we have better things to do with our time?

It is tragic that many people who ask such questions, claiming to be too busy for the reading of poetry, spend too much time on the couch watching TV or surfing the web in pursuit of trivia. Techno-addiction lulls the mind into a comfort zone of banality, narcissistically self-centred and self-gratifying, disconnecting us from the reality that surrounds us. At the same time, even as it lulls us from reality, it agitates us into a state of restlessness, which is one of the defining traits of addiction. Thus we find ourselves in a state of soporific agitation, unable to awaken ourselves from virtual reality to veritable reality and yet unable to find any rest in our narcissistic escapism.

In a purely practical sense, the reading of poetry can save us from wasting our lives in this way. And there's no need to take my word for it. Let's hearken instead to the wisdom of the great angelic doctor, St. Thomas Aquinas. Once we understand what Aquinas says about our engagement with reality, we will understand the root cause of our disastrous disengagement from it

and the reason that poetry can help to heal us of our tendency to waste our lives on trash and trivia.

In essence, St. Thomas shows us that humility is the beginning of wisdom because it is the necessary prerequisite for our eyes being opened to reality. One who has humility will have a sense of gratitude for his own existence and for the existence of all that he sees. This gratitude enables him to see with the eyes of wonder. The eyes that see with wonder will be moved to contemplation on the goodness, truth and beauty of the reality they see. Such contemplation leads to the greatest fruit of perception, which is what St. Thomas calls *dilatatio*, the dilation of the mind. It is this dilation, this opening of the mind to the depths of reality, which enables a person to live in communion with the fullness of goodness, truth and beauty.

Let's summarize: Humility leads to gratitude which sees with wonder, prompting the contemplation that leads to the dilation of the mind.

Our modern obsession with social media might be seen as an infernal inversion of this true order of perception. If humility opens our eyes to reality, pride shuts them, blinding and binding us with the arrogance of our own ignorance. Pride, or narcissism, sees only itself or, more correctly, it sees everything in the light or darkness of its own self-centredness. It is myopic. It cannot see beyond its own self-centre of gravity. It lacks gratitude. Such ingratitude leads to the cynicism which cannot experience wonder nor see the beauty inherent in reality. This lack of wonder makes contemplation on the goodness, truth and beauty of reality impossible and therefore makes *dilatatio* unattainable.

Once again, let's summarize: Pride leads to ingratitude which lacks wonder, preventing contemplation and therefore closing instead of opening the mind.

Another way of saying the same thing is to say that humility *takes* time while pride merely *wastes* it.

Truly humble souls, filled with gratitude and wonder, *take* the time to stop in the midst of a busy day to sit in the presence of beauty. They open their eyes to the glories of God's Creation and to the reflected and refracted glories of man's sub-creation in art and literature, or else they close their eyes from all distraction so that they can listen to the singing of birds or the singing of choirs. Such time *taken* is the most joyful part of the day, a time when the mind communes with the reality of which it is a part.

Prideful souls, lacking both gratitude and wonder, *waste* their time with mindless distraction after mindless distraction, filling the vacuum that their mindlessness has created with whatever trash and trivia that their fingers or thumbs can deliver on the gadgets to which they are chained. For such people, these gadgets have become *godgets*, pathetic and petty gods which command their attention and rule and ruin their lives. Such people spend much more time with their *godgets* than with their God.

If we wish to have minds open to the presence of God we need to take time and not waste it. We need to take time in the silence of prayer or the silence of poetry. We need more time with trees and less time with trash and trivia. A tree, or a flower, or a sunset are priceless gifts for which a lack of gratitude is a sin of omission. We cannot ever be wasting time when we're taking it in wonder-filled contemplation.

To be or not to be. That is the question. To be alive to the goodness, truth and beauty which surrounds us, or not to be alive to it. To delight in the presence of Creation so that we might dilate into the presence of the Creator or to distract ourselves to death.

Having hopefully persuaded the reader of the importance of taking time for poetry rather than wasting it on trash, let's take

a quick look at the way that poetry has enlightened and enlivened Christendom, taking a lightning tour of the major poets of civilization.

Beginning in the pre-Christian era we see how the poets of Athens and Jerusalem prepared the way for the coming of Christ with their creative gifts. Homer invoked his Muse, the divine bestower of the supernatural gift of *poiesis*, to show the ways in which hubris is humbled and the will of Zeus is accomplished. King David sang the praises of God in the Psalms and Solomon sang with wisdom the Song of Songs.

As the Son rose on Christian civilization, the Blessed Virgin emerged as the mother of poetry as she is the Mother of God in the magnificence of the Magnificat, and St. John, her divinely appointed son, is revealed as the progenitor of Christian metaphysical poetry in the opening lines of his Gospel and in the mystical majesty of his apocalyptic vision.

In the earliest days of the English language, the *scop* or bard praised the newly-discovered Christ in poems such as “The Wanderer”, “The Seafarer” and most especially in the revered reverence of “The Dream of the Rood”.

In the high middle ages, inspired by the beauty of Beatrice and the brilliance of St. Thomas Aquinas, Dante outsoared in aquiline splendor all other poets, before or since, as his mentor, Aquinas, had outsoared all other theologians and philosophers. In mediæval England, Geoffrey Chaucer defended Christian realism and Catholic orthodoxy against the proto-relativist heterodoxy of nominalism. Apart from Chaucer, many other poets, cloaked by time in the mantle of anonymity, graced the language and culture of the English middle ages with some marvelous Christian verse.

Following the rupture of the Reformation and the rise of the secular humanism of the late Renaissance, Shakespeare’s quill quickened to the defence of traditional Christianity. Meanwhile,

in the midst of the dynamism of the Counter-Reformation in Spain, San Juan de la Cruz plumbed the depths of the human soul with the sanity and sanctity that are the fruits of faith and reason.

In England, another saint, the Jesuit martyr St. Robert Southwell wrote with fearless faith in defence of outlawed orthodoxy. His poetry is excellent in its own right, earning him a deserved place amongst the finest English Metaphysical Poets, but is also important as the source and inspiration for some of Shakespeare's finest lines.

Other metaphysical poetry, singing the praises of Christ in the perilous and electrified atmosphere of post-Reformation England, includes the convoluted contortions of Donne's apostate musings, the anglo-catholicism of Herbert's high Anglicanism, and the baroque ecstasies of Crashaw's recusant and exiled Catholicism.

Dante's divine vision of paradise is lost in Milton's puritanical and anti-Trinitarian epic, which would spawn, unwittingly, the satanic musings of Shelley and later generations of egocentric Romantics. Soon after Milton had floundered theologically in his heterodox masterpiece, John Dryden would recover the Catholic vision in the brilliant satire of *The Hind and the Panther*, in which Dryden, newly-converted to Catholicism, exposes the errors and heresies of Anglicanism and affirms the truth and authority of the Church.

Throughout most of the eighteenth century, the cold and deadly grip of the so-called Enlightenment threatened to strangle the life out of the poetry of praise. In the midst of this faithless and frigid period, the solitary voice of Alexander Pope sounded forth as a champion of the theocentric vision of Man.

By the end of the eighteenth century it might have seemed as though cold empiricism had triumphed, heralding the utopia of

utilitarianism and the end of the age of faith. Just as the poetry of praise was pronounced as being dead and buried, however, it was resurrected in the Romanticism of Wordsworth and Coleridge. This regenerative influence would create the cultural climate in which the seeds of the Catholic literary revival would germinate, sprout and flower.

The Blessed John Henry Newman, father of the Catholic revival, was himself a poet of considerable merit, a fact that is often overlooked, overshadowed as it is by his achievement as a theologian, philosopher, preacher and prose stylist. *The Dream of Gerontius*, probably his greatest poem and certainly his most ambitious, offers a vision of the purgatorial life of the soul after death. Other fine poems of praise by the inimitable Newman include “The Golden Prison”, “The Pilgrim Queen” and “The Sign of the Cross”.

In 1866, Newman received a young man named Gerard Manley Hopkins into the Church. Hopkins would become a Jesuit priest and also one of the most important and influential poets of the following century. “The Wreck of the Deutschland”, Hopkins’ highest achievement in verse, is perhaps the finest poem of the Victorian age.

As the Victorian period drew to a close, the Decadent period produced many converts to Catholicism who enriched the culture with a poetry of praise infused with a penitential spirit. Most notable among the fin de siècle Decadent convert poets were Oscar Wilde, Ernest Dowson and Lionel Johnson, all of whom were following in the footsteps of their French Decadent forebear, Paul Verlaine.

In defiance of those prophets of modernist doom who predict that society is “progressing” beyond faith to a “post-Christian” future, the most recent century has produced an abundance of first-rate Christian poetry. Great Christian poets of the twentieth century include Hilaire Belloc, G. K. Chesterton, Maurice



Baring, Alfred Noyes, T. S. Eliot, Edith Sitwell, Roy Campbell, and R. S. Thomas.

Obviously this panoramic overview of the poetry of praise throughout almost three millennia of civilization is far from being a presentation of the whole triumphantly resplendent picture. It contains many sins of omission and its focus is too anglocentric. It serves, nonetheless, as a fitting, if inadequate, summary of the trinitarian heart of great poetry, which reflects the goodness, truth and beauty of the cosmos in the spirit of faith, hope and love.

In similar fashion, the present volume endeavours to present a panoramic selection of the finest Christian poetry of the past millennium, which, sins of omission notwithstanding, represents a survey of poems every Catholic should know. The goal was to produce a *balanced* and *representative* cross-section of the finest Christian verse in the English language in terms of its chronological distribution throughout the centuries and in terms of the poets included.

Another conscious decision has been to arrange the selection chronologically so that the volume would serve not only as an anthology of verse but also as a history of verse. In order to accentuate the latter aspect, brief biographical and anecdotal introductions have been given to each section. These stress the varied relationships of the poets both with each other and with the trials and tribulations of the often turbulent times in which they lived. These introductions have been kept deliberately short so that they do not interfere with the flow of the verse, but it is hoped that they cement and harmonise the whole, enabling the reader to see the poets and the verse in the historical context in which they belong.

It is also hoped that the right balance has been struck between academic sensibilities and popular taste. Certainly, throughout

the preparation of this volume it was always the intention to pass the academic acid test while at the same time retaining the collection's populist appeal. The best of both worlds was the quest and while no anthology can ever please all the people all the time, it is hoped that this selection will at least please most of the people most of the time.

Perhaps, when all is said and done, the reader alone will make a final judgment regarding the success or otherwise of this volume. Yet ultimately, of course, the final judgment resides elsewhere and this anthology is intended as an offering in that direction also.

## ST HILDEGARD OF BINGEN (1098–1179)

*The reputation of Hildegard, a Benedictine nun and visionary, has undergone something of a resurrection in recent years. She was certainly a woman of many talents, composing hymns, a morality play, commentaries on the Gospels, on the Athanasian Creed, and on the Rule of St Benedict, as well as works of medicine and natural history. She was a highly gifted artist and her illustrations of her visionary experiences have been compared with the work of William Blake. Her tremendous versatility extended to the writing of poetry, two examples of which are reproduced here.*

### *The Love of All*

Love overflows into all  
Glorious from ocean's depths beyond the farthest star,  
Bounteous in loving all creation;  
For to the King most High  
Love has given her kiss of peace.

### *Mary of Magdala*

Holy Mary of Magdala,  
you came with a fount of tears  
to the Fount of tenderheartedness,  
whose glow of overwhelming warmth you felt,

bringing you back from sin to life,  
as you found sweet comfort in your bitter pain.  
Dear Mary, you have proved yourself  
that a sinner may be reconciled to her Creator.  
May Christ's loving purpose have mercy on me;  
may that same medicine restore my listless soul to health.  
You were the Lord's dear love and you knew well that love,  
forgiving you your many sins,  
because you loved so much!  
I am not the worst sinner, blessed Mary,  
but I long with hope for that mercy  
by which our sins are blotted out.  
I am unhappy and plunged into the depths of sin,  
weighed down with the burden,  
imprisoned in shadows, cut off from myself,  
cloaked in darkness.  
I have been chosen and loved,  
loved by God's own choice,  
yet I am unhappy and seek your help, blessed Mary,  
for you have made the darkness light.



## ST FRANCIS OF ASSISI (1181–1226)

. . . we talk about a man who cannot see the wood for the trees. St Francis was a man who did not want to see the wood for the trees. He wanted to see each tree as a separate and almost a sacred thing, being a child of God and therefore a brother or sister of man.

G. K. Chesterton

*Born the son of a wealthy cloth-merchant, St Francis renounced his inheritance and all worldly possessions, choosing a life of voluntary poverty and prayer. For two or three years he lived in solitude as a wandering mendicant. Eventually a small group of disciples gathered round him. This was the birth of the Franciscan order which, along with the Dominicans, was to have a revolutionary and revitalising influence on the life of the Church for centuries afterwards.*

*‘The Canticle of Brother Sun’, also known as ‘The Lauds of the Creatures’, was composed when St Francis was seriously ill at San Damiano, the semi-derelict church that he had rebuilt with his own hands.*



*The Canticle of Brother Sun*

All-highest, almighty good Lord,  
to you be praise, glory and honour  
and every blessing.  
To you alone they are due,  
and no man is worthy to speak your name.

Be praised, my Lord, in all your creatures,  
especially Brother Sun  
who makes daytime,  
and through him you give us light.  
And he is beautiful, radiant with great splendour,  
and he is a sign  
that tells, All-highest, of you.

Be praised, my Lord, for Sister Moon and the stars;  
you formed them in the sky,  
bright and precious and beautiful.

Be praised, my Lord, for Brother Wind,  
and for the air and the clouds,  
and for fair, and every kind of weather,  
by which you give your creatures food.

Be praised, my Lord, for Sister Water,  
who is most useful and humble  
and lovely and chaste.

Be praised, my Lord, for Brother Fire,  
through whom you light up the night for us;

and he is beautiful and jolly  
and lusty and strong.

Be praised, my Lord, for our Sister Mother Earth,  
who keeps us, and feeds us,  
and brings forth fruits of many kinds,  
with coloured flowers and plants as well.

Be praised, my Lord, for those who grant pardon  
for love of you  
and bear with sickness and tribulation.  
Blessed are those who bear these things peaceably  
because, All-highest,  
they will be granted a crown by you.

Be praised, my Lord, for our Sister Bodily Death,  
whom no living man can escape.  
Woe to those who die in mortal sin!  
Blessed are those whom she will find  
doing your holy will,  
for to them the second death  
will do no harm.

Bless and praise my Lord,  
thank him, and serve him  
in all humility.

*Prayer for Peace*

Lord. Make me an instrument of your peace.  
Where there is hatred let me sow love.  
Where there is injury, pardon;  
Where there is doubt, faith;  
Where there is despair, hope;  
Where there is darkness, light;  
Where there is sadness, joy.

Divine Master,  
Grant that I may seek not so much to be consoled as to  
console;  
To be understood as to understand;  
To be loved as to love;  
For it is in giving that we receive;  
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned,  
And it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life. Amen.



## ST GERTRUDE THE GREAT (CA. 1257–1302)

*A Benedictine nun and visionary, Gertrude underwent a profound conversion at the age of twenty-five and had various mystical experiences throughout the remaining twenty years of her life. These were based on the Liturgy and many of her visions actually took place during the singing of the Divine Office. She is regarded as one of the most important medieval mystics and was a pioneer of the devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. The first of these verses was composed as a prayer for the Office of Vespers while the second is a prayer on the Te Deum for the anniversary of a nun's profession.*

### *Resting in Love*

My Love, my God,  
you are my dearest possession,  
without you I have no hope nor desire  
in heaven or in earth.  
You are my true inheritance  
and all the longing of my life and thought.

My Love,  
let the goal of my life  
be your pleasure consummated in me!

Show me that covenant of marriage  
in which my heart joins with yours.  
Show me, as evening draws on,  
for you are the light of the evening sky,  
the light I see in the face of my dear God.  
My Evening Star, dearest and brightest of all,  
graciously appear to me at my death,  
that I may have the Evening Star of my desire,  
and gently fall asleep in all your fullest sweetness,  
and find rest in my heart.  
Come, fount of eternal light,  
take me to yourself from whom I came.  
There may I know as I am known,  
and love as I am loved,  
that I may see you as you are, my God,  
and, seeing you, enjoy you and possess you  
for evermore.

### *Love That Nurtures*

Holy Trinity,  
you are the source  
from whom the living Godhead shines, all love and wisdom.  
From you springs God's own powerfulness,  
insight from your mutual oneness,  
overflowing sweetness, love-kindling kindness,  
all-embracing holiness, all-pervasive goodness:  
yours is the praise, the honour and the glory,  
yours is the power and vision of prayer,  
yours the offering of thankfulness!

And you, O Love, God yourself,  
loving bond of the Holy Trinity,  
you lie down to take your rest and pleasure  
among earth's children in awesome purity,  
yet ablaze with the fire of your love,  
like a rose of beauty gathered from among the thorns!

O Love! You only know the paths of truth and living,  
in you the Holy Trinity makes covenants of loving,  
through you the Spirit's better gifts are working,  
from you the seeds that suckle life's fruits are abounding,  
from you the sweeter honey of God's joy is flowing,  
from you the Lord of hosts pours richer drops of blessing,  
the loving promise of the Spirit's treasure,  
—rare beyond all measure!